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Tutoring Writing is Performing Social Work is Coloring Hair: Writing Center Work as Activity System

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by Shannon Carter

How experience in other disciplines and occupations can be used to train writing center tutors.

Shannon Carter

Melissa Weintraub was a social worker long before she became a peer tutor, work that she found tremendously useful as she came to understand the value-sets, special terminology, and tricks of the trade reproduced in the community of practice we call "writing center work." As she explains in her recent article for the ***Writing Lab Newsletter***, "There is a significant overlap in the ways in which we draw information from students, help them find their own solutions, and maintain boundaries" (10). Both positions eschew directness in favor of talk that "draw[s] in" the client, generating the emotional, physical, and intellectual space necessary for what she calls an "initial inspection of each other" before moving into the real work of the session (10). In neither position did Weintraub tell her clients what to think or do but rather pushed them to find their *own* answers, all the while, as she explains, "using me just for guidance" (11).

The work that goes on in the writing center is at once nothing like and very much like the work that goes on anywhere else. I'm certainly not the first to notice this. Beth Rapp Young, for example, compares tutoring to nursing, revealing that clients often come to nurses feeling "confused, anxious, and uncertain about how to be an active part of the healing process," just as students often come to the writing center no less "confused, anxious, [or] uncertain about how to be an active part of the [writing] process" (6). For similar reasons, Michael Steven Marx suggests that with the many similarities between tutoring and counseling, we should consider making use of the field's

"research on termination" in addressing "the unique circumstances of bringing long term tutorial relationships to a close" (52). The most amusing comparison to another profession, however, has to be Scott Russell's "Clients Who Frequent Madam Barnett's Emporium," which articulates a surprising number of similarities between the work of tutors in the writing center and that performed by those in the sex trade, specifically with respect to the visitation patterns of the clients involved.

While these comparisons to other sorts of work may be interesting academic exercises, however, I am more interested in determining how (or if) we might make use of such comparisons in the training of new tutors. By articulating the similarities among the ways expertise is developed in a variety of jobs, new tutors can develop a higher tolerance for the theory-practice dichotomy with which the writing center community often struggles and about which much has already been written. Among those attempting to reconcile this dichotomy is Peter Vandenberg who argues that "[i]t is by way of theory that we determine the practical" (66). Conversely, however, in his regularly reprinted article "Writing Center Practice Often Counters Its Theory. So What?" Eric Hobson contends that though "conventional wisdom . . . [may] reinforce the idea that theory leads to practice . . . the inverse is more often true" (2).

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Despite the many provocative arguments on the subject, however, tensions like these are not unique to writing center work. In fact, the theoretical constructs often said to inform practice are never applicable to every activity performed within a given community of practice; for this reason, all workers in all types of labor will be similarly frustrated with this disconnect between the theoretical and practical and vice versa. Therefore, it seems appropriate to ask new tutors to develop a deep awareness of the theory-practice dichotomy embedded in work seemingly unrelated to tutoring writing and to articulate the ways in which they were able to develop expertise in a more familiar community of practice, despite the ambiguities such a dichotomy necessarily generates.

Young encourages tutors to "think consciously about concepts or activities from their majors which might apply to their work in the writing center" (8). In writing centers like mine, however, where a large percentage of the staff is likely to come from disciplines like English, the exercise of "addressing concepts from a consultant's 'home' major" may not be as productive as it could be with a more diverse pool (10). Thus it seems appropriate for tutors to draw upon workplace and other similar experiences with which they have some familiarity and activity theory seems to be a productive tool for doing so. These needn't be formal positions, as–for some new consultants–tutoring may be their very first job. For our purposes, any work with which they are deeply familiar will do–house sitting, delivering papers, or even the work of others with whom they have lived for a number of years.

Using the conceptual tools provided by activity theory, this essay will begin by defining this school of thought and its relevance to writing center work and, again, using activity theory as conceptual tool, illustrate the ways in which other, seemingly unrelated work might be similarly constructed via this theory/practice dichotomy.

Activity Theory

Embedded in activity theory[1] are two, complimentary assumptions: (1) language, literacy, and learning are embedded in communities of practice rather than entirely within the minds of individuals; and (2) communities reproduce themselves through social practices. According to activity theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, a "community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice." The term "impl[ies] participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities" (98).

Asking tutors to reflect on their past experiences in other workplace contexts is crucial...

In any given community of practice–be it social work or nursing, sex work or counseling, quilting or basket weaving, Anime fandom or writing center work–some activities will be understood as "appropriate" and others largely inappropriate, and the majority of these activities cannot be understood apart from the activity *system* in which these actions are perpetuated. These systems are social and cultural rather than individual and objective in that any activity system is made up of groups of individuals who sanction and endorse particular ways of doing things and particular results, identifying some results and processes as innovative and valuable and condemning others as ineffective, inappropriate, or even unacceptable. In this context, tutoring becomes not a process we can represent in any structuralized way so much as an activity system shaped by ever-shifting rules established by, among other things, the theoretical assumptions guiding scholarship in writing center studies, as well as the local conditions of the writing center itself, especially as shaped by material and historical conditions and as articulated by the current writing center director and the philosophical principles guiding their vision of what the writing center is, as well as the training program and materials representing that vision.

To return to Melissa Weintraub–the former social worker whose story opened the current essay–we could say that she was very lucky that the value-sets and tricks of the trade reproduced in social work are so very similar to those sanctioned and endorsed by the writing center community. Not only did her one-on-one experiences themselves inform her writing center work, but the value-sets generated and maintained in the scholarship of both communities made her previous experiences that much more applicable to her new ones. In an article so influential that many of us call it the "Writing Center Manifesto," Stephen North offers a *theoretical* justification for "The Idea of a Writing Center" in which he asserts that "talk . . . is the essence of tutoring" (76). Likewise, the parallels Melissa draws between the techniques she used as a social worker and those she used as a tutor began with "talking" as a "primary action" (10). In yet another wildly-successful, regularly reprinted article, Jeff Brooks offers "concrete strategies for tutors to put into *practice* Stephen North's notion that in writing centers '[o]ur job is to produce better writers, not better writing'" (Learner and Boquet 4, emphasis mine). As the majority of our most popular tutor training textbooks and materials attest, the writing center community values "talk" that "draws in" the writer, nondirective or "minimalist" tutoring, and open-ended questions. These are the same value-sets embedded in social work as Melissa represents it. According to Melissa, in both "the onus of fixing the problem . . . is ultimately with the student. It helps to remember that most of the work of therapy is done outside the session, in client's real lives; so, too, learning how

to write . . .” happens–to a great extent–beyond the writing center’s walls, in the student’s real life beyond our sphere of influence (11).

Asking tutors to reflect on their past experiences in other workplace contexts is crucial for two reasons. First, doing so builds in new tutors a greater tolerance for the ambiguities that so often emerge in our day-to-day work and greater flexibility in interpreting and responding to them. Second, exploring more familiar communities of practice and articulating the similarities to this unfamiliar one greatly expand the brand new tutor’s repertoire of relevant experiences, enabling her to draw on experiences that extend well beyond her current, admittedly limited writing center experiences and apply them to this new context.

[T]he work of the stylist parallels our work as educators.

Training for writing center work after spending more than ten years in the “real world” as a social worker seemed natural enough for Melissa. But what of those positions that at first glance may seem to uphold very different value-sets than those we promote in the writing center community? How can we make use of that kind of work?

In *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*, Mike Rose offers several case studies of workers in a variety of positions that help him articulate the cognitive dimension of what we rarely consider to be “mind work” (xvii). Accordingly, Rose challenges what he calls our “biases about intelligence” when it comes to manual labor and service work. As he explains, when we dismiss the intelligence necessary to install a new toilet in an older home, color hair without drying it out, or effectively serve a restaurant full of hungry customers, we “develop limited educational programs and fail to make fresh and meaningful connections among disparate kinds of skill and knowledge” (216). It seems such work also has much to teach us about writing center work and how it functions as an activity system, especially how new tutors might come to participate in such work. Thus, it seems appropriate to ask ourselves questions like the following: What special terminology is involved in writing center work? What are the “particular movements of the body [that] make things happen? What are some of the tricks of the trade that experienced tutors make use of and why? How did we learn these things ourselves? Brooks offers several practical suggestions, and many of us have made great use of these in our own work. Experienced tutors, for example, “sit beside the student, not across a desk”; they “have the student read the paper aloud” (2). How did we learn to make effective use of these strategies, these body movements, these “tricks of the trade”?

Tutor Writing is Coloring Hair

Expertise in any community of practice requires what Rose calls “a diagnostic frame of mind,” which means workers considered “experts” are “both knowledgeable about the way things are constructed and systematic in the way they use that knowledge” (59-60). A hair stylist, for example, must have diagnostic frame of mind. Before a stylist ever touches a client’s hair with a pair of scissors or brush full of color, she must perform a variety of rather complex operations that, in essence, translate what the client wants into what her hair can actually *do*. As Rose explains, the client “conveys a cut, a style, or, not uncommonly, a *feeling* she wants.” One client, for instance, tells her stylist, “I want something light and summery”; another asks to have her cut “freshened”

and "sassy" (37, 31). Before the stylist can begin developing a solution that will make the client's hair "light and summery," the stylist must first (a) figure out what the customer really means by these terms and (b) determine what she will have to do to the client's hair to make it happen, determine whether it is even possible, and, if not, determine how to communicate this impossibility to the customer without hurting her feelings or compromising the stylist's tip (or future customer base). The latter diagnosis provides what Rose calls "baseline data." That is, the stylist "analyzes the client's hair . . . ,past treatments, and how the client manages her hair on her own, all of which can effect the stylist's decisions on how to cut, treat, and style the hair" (37).

Once the baseline data have been gathered, the stylist incorporates it into the process of arriving at a solution to the request, perhaps something "summery" or "sassy." Only then can she proceed with the cut, which will require her to draw on a repertoire of strategies and techniques, some of which she learned through formal training, much through observation, and more through having become proficient enough in that community of practice to innovate, make her own way.

[T]he position of tutor is a unique one in that the new tutor is, at once, representing the community of practice that is academic discourse *and* a newcomer to the community of practice that is writing center work...

In many ways, then, the work of the stylist parallels our work as educators. Good educators, like good hair stylists, must have a *diagnostic frame of mind*. In the writing center, for example, we often begin by asking the client what she wants to work on today. Perhaps she wants to "clean up her grammar mistakes." It may seem a pretty straight forward request; however, before we can proceed with the session, we must first develop an agenda that we can only call informed after an informal diagnosis, which must also make use of, among other things, the "rule" established and maintained by a large portion of the writing center community that "cleaning up grammar mistakes" is not what we do. Perhaps (as is likely) we learn that her paper has much more significant problems than the surface-level issues she wants to address, a diagnosis likewise guided by our understanding of related "rules" for writing center work established and maintained in writing center scholarship and the training materials that emerge from it. The tutor, like the good hairstylist, must be "both knowledgeable about the way things are constructed and systematic in the way [she] use[s] that knowledge" (Rose 59-60). How does writing work? How do inexperienced writers often approach writing? What might be the real problem here? How can I figure that out? The "baseline data" come from an assessment of several different elements, including, among other things, the writer's body language, her words and her requests, her past experiences with writing in general, and the strength of the current draft. We can't know the answers to most of these questions without an understanding of a variety of the findings and arguments in composition studies with respect to how people write and are taught to write, many of which are hotly debated in the scholarly field itself, thus mere awareness offers no clear-cut answers, either.

In performing the diagnosis and in approaching the session once the agenda has been set, the tutor, like the stylist, must rely on a repertoire of strategies and a range of techniques. Like the stylist, once the tutor has determined the agenda, she must rely on the "repertoire of strategies and a range of techniques"

accessible to her, some of which she will have acquired through direct instruction, others by observing experienced tutors in action, and still others by her own "legitimate" participation in this community of practice. In any case, a deep reliance on just the theoretical issues debated in writing center scholarship will not enable a new tutor to participate in this activity system–at least not effectively; however, neither will a reliance on the "strategic know-how" one might gather from more practical materials and training methods that offer assistance with the tutoring "process" with no discussion of the theories and controversies informing said practice.

Conclusion

Tutoring writing, then, is not unlike performing therapy (as a social worker), coloring hair (as a hairstylist), or writing a paper. Of course these activities are not terribly similar to writing center work, either. Among the many differences articulated here, it must be said that the position of tutor is a unique one in that the new tutor is, at once, representing the community of practice that is academic discourse *and* a newcomer to the community of practice that is writing center work–at once both master and apprentice, both "newcomer" and "old-timer." All of this has rather significant implications for all of us–not only new tutors but their trainers and the scholars who write about writing center work, especially given that our work, our identities, our *profession*, are simultaneously reproduced *and* forever altered by any and all goal-oriented behaviors within the spaces identified as appropriate for writing center work. In the end, then, the actions of our tutors make us who we are. I, for one, wouldn't have it any other way.

Notes

The current essay is culled from a much larger work entitled, "Tutoring Writing is Bagging Groceries is Coloring Hair is Fixing a Sink: Writing Center Work as activity System."

[1] The post-process theorist David Russell has made the greatest use of activity theory as it applies to composition studies.

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